

What Can I Do With My Woodland?

What do I want to do with my woodland? Following are some of the most common goals owners have for their forestland. Not every owner has every one of these goals, but most are compatible with one another.

- Make it firesafe / protect my home and property from wildfire
- Maintain and improve forest health
- Enjoy it – recreational activities such as walking, birdwatching, etc.
- Grow & harvest firewood
- Grow & harvest poles, posts & other products for home/farm use
- Grow & harvest timber and/or non-timber forest products for income
- Maintain & improve wildlife habitat/natural features
- Be a good steward of the land
- “Restore” the land
- Plant more trees / reforestation/ revegetation
- Keep it natural, maintain privacy

Note: Often, woods or forestland are just one component of a rural property in southern Oregon. In addition to the wooded area, rural owners may have a homesite, garden, small orchard, vineyard, dry or irrigated pasture or other land types and uses on the property, and these may be the owner’s main focus. This checklist focuses goals and activities for the forested or wooded area of a property, recognizing that these are often embedded in a larger property and broader set of goals.

Make it firesafe

Southern Oregon is fire country, and home fire protection is a top priority for most owners. The first priority is protecting the home and immediate environment and ingress / egress. Then, work your way outward.

- Get in-person advice from Oregon Department of Forestry and/or local Fire Department/Fire Protection District potential. What do I need to do to maintain or improve my defensible space and home fire protection?
- Improve, retrofit home and outbuildings as needed (e.g., screen vents)
- Reduce hazardous fuels in home ignition zone (HIZ), driveways and other access
- Install or maintain fire-resistant plantings
- Complete annual maintenance tasks (cleaning gutters, etc.)
- Reduce hazardous fuels in priority areas beyond the HIZ

Make it healthy

In general, a healthy forest has a mix of tree species that are well-suited to the site. Individual trees have healthy crowns and are vigorous for their age. Forest density is not excessive. Some dead and dying trees are part of a healthy forest! Brush and understory vegetation is also healthy – the forest doesn’t need to look like a park.

- Assess condition of trees and stands of trees on the property. Are trees healthy and vigorous in general? Are there a lot of stressed or dead and dying trees? Are the species growing there well suited to the site in the long term? Is the forest overgrown and excessively dense? Note: Some advice and/or training are often needed to make these kinds of assessments.
- Thin overgrown stands, retaining healthier trees.
- Thin around large individual trees such as oaks and pines that are under threat from surrounding competition.

Enjoy it!

Hiking, birdwatching, wildlife watching, fishing, hunting, etc.

- Walk your property and get to know it! Grab some field guides. Identify special features such as springs, outcrops, views, streamside areas, interesting or rare vegetation, historical relicts, large or character trees, etc.
- Create a trail system to access the property.

Grow and harvest firewood

Many owners heat partly or entirely with wood. Madrone is the preferred species; oak and Douglas-fir are also good for fuelwood. Fuels reduction projects often generate a lot of firewood. Madrone, oak, and other hardwoods can be harvested perpetually using the “coppice” system (cutting stems and allowing resprouting from established root system).

Grow and harvest poles, posts and other products for home and farm use

Poles and posts can be used to build fences, sheds, and many other structures. They are strong, cheap, and labor intensive to produce! Peeling the bark off greatly increases the decay resistance and longevity of poles. They are easiest to peel in spring when the bark is loose.

Grow and harvest forest products for income

Forest products include timber and logs as well as non-timber products such as mushrooms, floral greenery, and medicinals. Timber sales can, but don't always, provide significant financial returns. They also can have a big impact on your woodland's condition, positive or negative. If you are interested in a timber sale, this is one time you really want to plan ahead, learn all you can, and get a lot of advice. Consider hiring a consulting forester to help you if you are not experienced. Markets for non-timber forest products exist in some areas but owners will need to be creative in identifying and pursuing opportunities.

- Ensure that your woods are adequately stocked. Plant bare/open areas (that support trees) with commercially viable species. Prepare the site before planting and protect seedlings from animal damage and moisture competition.
- Consider thinnings to remove low value trees or those of poor form, and to concentrate the stand's growth potential on fewer, more valuable trees. Thinning can be non-commercial if the trees are small or commercial if they are large enough and there are enough of them.
- Get advice on maintaining optimal tree growth
- “Selective harvest” and sustainable timber production requires careful planning and execution.
- If thinking about a harvest, plan ahead and get lots of advice. Consider hiring a professional forester to help with the sale.
- Inventory your property for non-timber forest products. Determine quantities and quality of salable products. Evaluate potential markets.

Maintain and improve habitat and natural features

Most woodlands provide habitat for at least some kinds of wildlife. Depending on how you do it, you can manage your woods to maximize habitat diversity in general, or to focus on certain desired species, such as songbirds or deer. In general, habitat that is good for some species is not as good for others – there are winners and losers. Things you can do to maintain and improve habitat and biodiversity and natural features in general include:

- Identify existing habitats on property and their relationship/contribution to larger landscape. For example, oak woodlands are relatively scarce and very important for wildlife.

- Protect existing identified habitats such as brush patches, streamside areas, springs, seeps, large trees, snags, and logs.
- Create or enhance habitat through thinning, planting of trees and shrubs for flowering and fruiting, and seeding.

Be a good steward of the land

Most woodland owners want to be good stewards and leave the land better than they found it. This is a worthy goal. How do you do that specifically? There are many possibilities, including activities already described. Here are a few ideas:

- Make your property more firesafe through thinning overgrown stands or brush patches and treating the thinning slash. Firesafe stands are generally more vigorous and healthy.
- Make you forest healthier through thinning and planting. Healthier stands are generally more firesafe as well.
- Create and maintain wildlife habitats
- Protect special or unique features such as groves of large or old trees, individual large trees, streamside areas, springs, etc.
- Identify and reduce erosion problems such as gullies in roads or skid trails. Install waterbars or other drainage structures.
- Maintain vegetated ground cover and streamside vegetation so that rainfall and runoff is safely captured, stored, and released to streams or ground water.
- Reduce and remove noxious weeds such as yellow starthistle, Scotch broom, and non-native blackberry.

“Restore” it

Restoration has many potential meanings. One type of restoration involves trying to mimic the natural processes that sustained forests in the past. Generally, past forest conditions in SW Oregon were characterized by many fewer but larger trees and more open, firesafe conditions maintained by frequent, light surface fires. Another type of restoration involves improving damaged or degraded forest conditions resulting from past high grade logging and/or exclusion of fire, which together often result in dense stands of small, low vigor trees at risk of loss from both fire and insect attack. Both types of restoration generally include thinning out smaller, lower value trees, reducing thinning slash, retaining larger “legacy” trees, shifting species composition towards more oaks and pines, and possibly introduction of prescribed underburning, among other activities. Restoration can also involve re-planting or encouraging natural seeding in areas that have been cleared, logged, burned, or otherwise disturbed and are now open.

- Restore to “pre-settlement conditions”
- Restore degraded forest
- Replant or re-vegetate bare or open areas

Keep it “natural” / maintain privacy

For some owners, privacy and enjoyment are the main objectives and they do not have the interest, time, energy, or capacity to “manage” their woodlands for the myriad of goals described above. They may have demanding jobs in town, kids’ activities, or their forest may simply be a backdrop for other activities such as farming. There is nothing inherently wrong with a hands-off approach but owners should recognize that 1) few if any local woodlands are truly pristine and 2) woodlands will still change over time without human management, with potentially both positive and negative consequences. The latter may include ever denser, more fire-prone conditions and reduced individual tree vigor.